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New inhabitants in an Alpine community: population dynamics and
conceptual challenges

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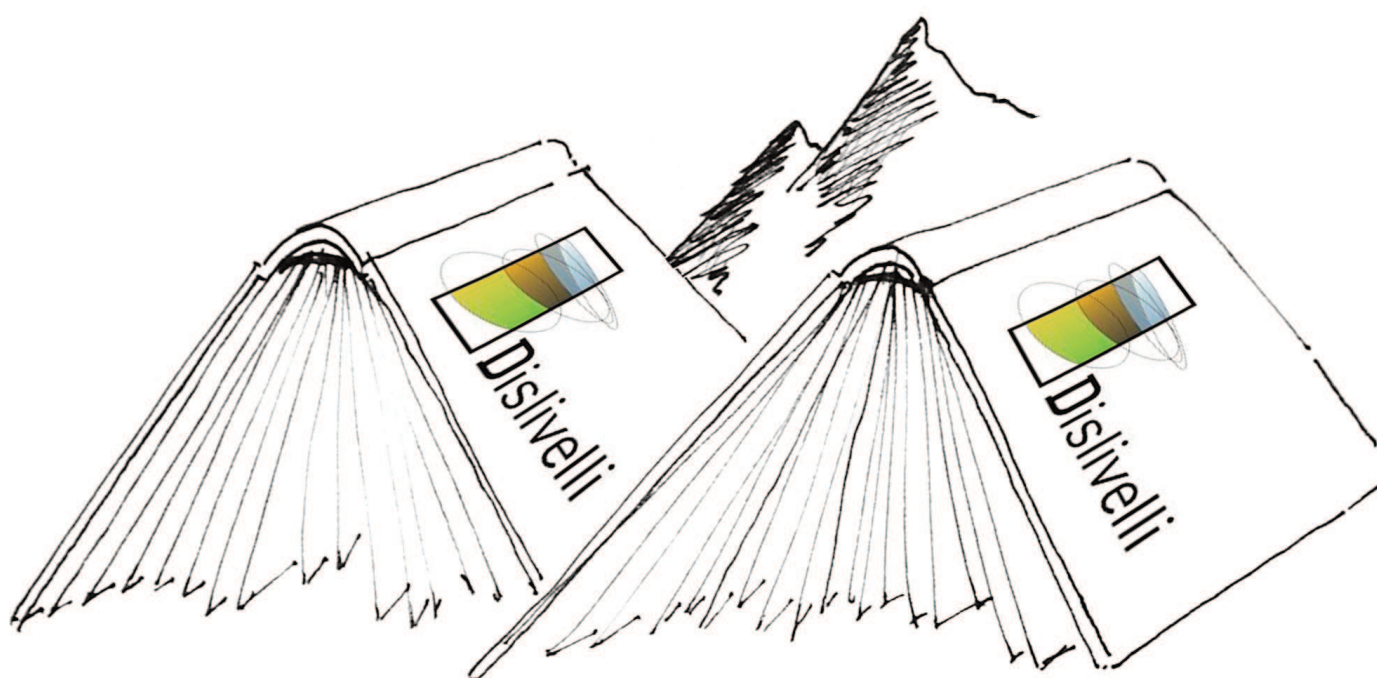
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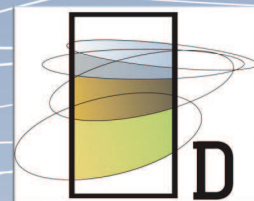
➔ New perspectives of Alpine research



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Nuovi abitanti in una comunità alpina: dinamiche demografiche e sfide concettuali

Roberta Clara Zanini

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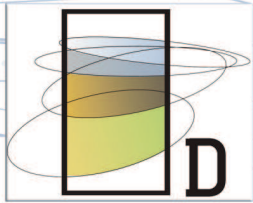
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New inhabitants in an Alpine community: population dynamics and conceptual challenges

Nuovi abitanti in una comunità alpina: dinamiche demografiche e sfide concettuali

Roberta Clara Zanini - University of Turin

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic research conducted in an Alpine community in Piedmont. The purpose was to study the dynamics of population change in an area of high mountain whose demographic history has repeatedly been characterized by waves of immigration. The research has shown that, in spite of a certain number of people leaving the mountain, equally important phenomena of neo-population can be highlighted. The ethnographic approach brought to light some local features whose unexpected complexity led to understand the importance of re-considering quite consolidated conceptual categories such as "new-old inhabitant", and of searching for a deeper conceptual analysis.

1. Introduction

Two years ago, during the first Forum of Young Researchers, I put forward some reflections

on how anthropology might offer ideas, methods and approaches that could prove useful in the study of the phenomena of de-population and re-population of Alpine communities (Zanini 2010). I hoped, at that time, to have an opportunity to check, through a period of intensive field research, whether the impressions and suggestions that I was enthusiastically proposing had actual operational validity. Two years later, the second Forum offered a perfect opportunity to present, however concisely, some of the results of a research I conducted in Macugnaga, in the Piedmontese Ossola Valley, as part of my work towards a PhD in Cultural Anthropology and with the support of the Piedmont Region within the framework of the project "E.CH.I. Swiss-Italian Ethnographies for the valorisation of intangible cultural heritage". One of the purposes of my investigation was to verify how the dynamics of depopulation, repopulation and population change had unfolded in a high mountain area that appeared potentially interesting because of its distinctive history and culture. Thus, in the first section of this article I will focus on the historical dynamics that led Macugnaga to become a community used to population movements and that are worth considering because of their influence on the present context. In the following section I will then concentrate more specifically on recent population movements and, above all, on the conceptual challenges that emerge from an anthropological study of this kind of dynamics. As a matter of fact, the ethnographic approach brought to light some local features whose unexpected complexity enabled me to understand the importance of re-considering quite consolidated conceptual categories such as "new-old inhabitant", and of searching for a deeper conceptual analysis. Despite being a small-scale example, Macugnaga might then supply a helpful case-study in re-population studies, particularly in comparison

with other Alpine communities showing a similar economic milieu.

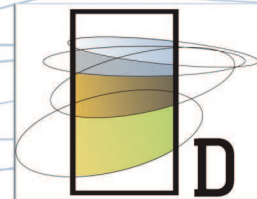
2. New inhabitants in the past

Rather paradoxically, one of the reasons that led me to choose Macugnaga was the fact that, at first sight, this place looked of little interest for a research whose primary purpose was to investigate depopulation and re-population dynamics. It would seem obvious that in order to observe re-population we need to focus on places that have previously experienced intense depopulation, and this is not actually the case of Macugnaga. So why did I select this village? The answer resides in the specificities of Macugnaga's demographic history, which has been repeatedly characterized by waves of immigration that have contributed to modify the composition of the population in very significant ways and in various moments.

The literature on the medieval peopling of the upper Anzasca Valley by Walser colonists from the Saas Valley in what is now Canton Valais is large and conveys rather mixed - and contrasting - interpretations about the very early stages of what is often called the "Walser colonization". It is not possible here to chronicle in detail neither the historical path that has turned Macugnaga into a Walser colony, nor the historical debate that has addressed this topic¹. We may just take note that the first documents attesting the presence of Alemannic populations in the territory of the Anzasca Valley go back to the mid-thirteenth century, and that migrations from the Valais to Macugnaga through the Mount Moro Pass continued until the sixteenth century and eventually restarted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with different forms and in an economic environment now affected by the presence of the extractive industry.

I mentioned the mining activity. In fact, Macugnaga was the stage of an intense mining past and the presence of the biggest gold mines in the Alps caused the arrival of large numbers of miners in the modern age and up to the middle of the twentieth

¹ For an overview of Walser history, see Rizzi (1992); for Macugnaga and the Anzasca Valley, see the book written by Rizzi in collaboration with Zanini and Valsesia (2006), and the one by Bertamini (2005).



century². Men from every part of Italy and Europe – at first from Tyrol, Voralberg and the mining area of Piedmont, more recently from Veneto and Sardinia – settled in Pestarena, the hamlet of the village where the extraction establishment was located. Just to give a few figures about the effect of the more recent waves, in 1871 the village recorded 603 residents, compared to 997 in 1951. It goes without saying that these early and intense waves of immigration deeply affected the community, "contaminating" the original Walser core and leading to significant economic development. The closure of the mines, due to their economic decline and to a tragic accident that killed four miners, led to a sharp decline in population, which fell from almost 1000 inhabitants in 1951 to 766 in 1971 and only 706 in 1981.

The demise of mining generated a need to convert the local economy, by orienting it to the tourist industry. Macugnaga is a historic site for the practice of mountain sports, climbing and mountaineering, as it lies close to the majestic and dominant – not only physically but also symbolically – Monte Rosa East face, the scene of some of the main alpine feats of modern and contemporary era. It is a presence, that of Monte Rosa, which affects the community in every aspect of its life, from the physical, economic and symbolic point of view, and it is considered by everybody as the horizon to which to refer, with no distinction between old or new inhabitants. The conversion from a predominantly mining community to a strongly tourist-oriented town meant that the population decline caused by the abandonment of many of the miners – but beware, not all! – was partly mitigated by the arrival of personnel employed in the hospitality industry and the related tourism facilities. In this case, new inhabitants were almost always people coming from the lower Anzasca Valley and from neighbouring areas.

3. Studying the new inhabitants of today: a conceptual challenge

These historical, social and economic features explain why Macugnaga did not experience the demographic collapse suffered by many Alpine localities and, therefore, also why it did not go through the kind of "rebirth" such as that recorded especially in certain municipalities in the Western Alps. All in all, although there are signs of a slow decline in the number of inhabitants, Macugnaga's population has not fallen dramatically. However, this apparent numeric stability hides dynamics of population turnover, which struck me as very interesting and clearly deserving to be studied in greater depth. Indeed, even limiting ourselves to consider statistical data on net migration, we can observe that, for a given number of people leaving the mountain, equally important phenomena of neo-population can be detected. It is there-

fore true that we are facing a slow decline, but if we "enter" the numerical data, we realize that it is possible to spot "uphill" migrations of new inhabitants. The aim of my fieldwork was therefore to figure out who these new inhabitants of Macugnaga were, what role they had in a community that has always been used to a constant change of its population and the reasons that pushed them to climb up the Anzasca valley.

The picture from my investigation is quite complex and this complexity has led me to reflect on what it means to "live in the mountains", on who can be defined an inhabitant of the mountains and how much attention should be paid when using such rather rigid categories as "new" or "old" inhabitant. As I early realized while conducting my research, I had taken for granted a definition of "new inhabitant"³ according to which everybody who had recently established permanently and continuously at Macugnaga could fall into this category. I was, then, looking for cases of new residents, in order to organize interviews, and statistical data were telling me that these people did exist. However, this appeared to be contradicted by responses I collected from local informants according to which it seemed that no new inhabitants were arriving, or had arrived in the recent past. The problem was, quite simply, that I was asking the wrong question. Ethnographic research is made of long moments of doubt and confusion and brief moments of light that allow you to see from new perspectives what has been done so far and to redirect observation and research. One of these moments was when I realized that in many conversations those people I used to refer to as "new inhabitants" were not regarded as such by the Macugnaga people to whom I was talking. By digging deeper it emerged that most of the people who had taken up residence in Macugnaga in recent years actually had behind them a long period of intense attendance of the locality, often as vacationers. It is almost always young people, approximately 25-35 years old, who had spent a long period of time in Macugnaga as children, becoming familiar with the places and at the same time becoming familiar with the inhabitants of the village. This familiarity does not directly translate into a total and unqualified, assimilation into the community, but in spite of this it seems to me quite clear that in these cases speaking of a "new" inhabitant is simplistic and potentially misleading. This is even more true if we consider that these same people are often not considered as new residents by the "locals" and do not see themselves as such.

I became thus aware that, once put to the test, the simple dichotomous "new-old resident" type was not probing enough to understand the local situation and its facets. Therefore, what it means to dwell in Macugnaga is not a matter that can be dealt

² Cerri and Zanni have dealt in depth with the mining history of Macugnaga (2008), particularly focusing on the population dynamics that were a direct result of the gold extraction. On these dynamics, see also the work by Viazzo (2009) and Zanini (2009).

³ The scientific literature dealing with the Alpine repopulation phenomena is very substantial. Since the first insights by Camanni (2002), Varotto (2003) and Bätzing (2005), who first directed their attention to the turnaround that has led the Alpine territory from a steady population decline to become a chequered area displaying important phenomena of growth, numerous studies have followed. Most of them have been carried out by demographers and geographers, who have focused on cases of demographic rebirth in the Alpine area and have wandered who were the neo-locals to whom such trend reversal was attributable. In particular, see the work by Perlik (2006), who explores the Alpine case within a broader analysis of the phenomenon of amenity migration (Moss 2006), and by Borsdorf (2009). For a discussion on the Italian context, see especially Corrado (2010), Corrado and Porcellana (2010), Dematteis (2011) and Steinicke (2011). For a general overview of the main theoretical contributions and of what is meant by "new resident", see in particular the work by Pettenati (2010). For a more specifically anthropological approach to the study of recent change in the composition of the Alpine communities see Viazzo (2012). Finally, a synoptic view of these demographic trends in the entire Alpine area, based on a careful review of the recent literature, has been recently provided by Bender and Kanitscheider (2012).



with by only two categories of analysis. On the contrary, it requires a series of intermediate elements, of alternative variables, which do not use continuous residence as an exclusive key of interpretation. This is certainly an important and in some respects decisive factor, but hardly sufficient. If we shift the stress from purely administrative aspects, as official residence is, to the representations of those who, in different ways, spend their life or part of it in Macugnaga, we can see that "living" in the mountain is something that has more to do with a sense of belonging, familiarity, recognition – one's own and from the others. It is rather a matter of awareness and knowledge of the places, acquired and recognized habits. Dwelling means then to be used to a place, in different and varying ways and to equally different and varying degrees.

Macugnaga is an interesting setting from another point of view. In fact, not only has the community experienced moments of intense demographic change in the past, but it keeps being involved in continuous population movements that change the composition of the present population all the time. I am referring in particular to two categories of people: long-time vacationers and those residents who live for long periods in other contexts to study or work. Both these categories do not fall unambiguously within the definition of "inhabitants", since these are people who do not live permanently in the village, but that spend in it short and iterated periods. In some ways they are actually opposite categories: the first is composed of vacationers from outside the village who spend some periods of leisure there, while the latter is made up of people that belong to the community to all intents and purposes but for various reasons are not permanent residents. In both cases they are part-time dwellers: commuters, vacationers, regulars that fully conform to those parameters of familiarity, recognition, sense of belonging to which I referred earlier.

Such a human landscape is then populated by different categories of people who are not always and exclusively consistent with the image of the new or old inhabitant we have come to know through the literature. In the case of Macugnaga, but I have reasons to believe that very much the same applies to other locations with an important history as tourist resorts, I think that, to a certain extent, even those people who attend the place for decades and have acquired familiarity with its inhabitants and its customs can be considered "inhabitants". Of course, they are not indistinguishable from residents, but the fact that if they decide to move permanently to Macugnaga they are not considered and do not consider themselves as "new" inhabitants, is a significant indicator of what I have tried to point out so far, namely that dwelling is something that involves several aspects and that manifests itself in different and complex ways which can be most neatly highlighted by ethnographic research.

SINTESI

In questo contributo intendo presentare una parte dei risultati di un periodo di ricerca sul campo condotta a Macugnaga, nella vallata piemontese dell'Osola, nel quadro di un dottorato di ricerca in antropologia culturale e grazie al sostegno della Regione Piemonte nell'ambito del progetto "E.CH.I. Etnografie italo-svizzere per la valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale immateriale". Uno degli obiettivi dell'indagine era verificare come si articolassero le dinamiche di spopolamento, ripopolamento e cambiamento della popolazione in una località di alta montagna che, per le sue caratteristiche storico-culturali, si presentava come potenzialmente interessante. La storia demografica di Macugnaga è stata ripetutamente caratterizzata da ondate di immigrazione che hanno contribuito a modificare sensibilmente l'assetto della popolazione. A partire dal primo popolamento walser di epoca medievale, poi mediante l'arrivo di cospicue quantità di minatori impiegati nelle locali miniere d'oro in età moderna e fino a metà del Novecento, e infine con i flussi di personale addetto alla ricettività turistica, la composizione della popolazione è stata caratterizzata da un costante mutamento. Queste caratteristiche storiche, sociali ed economiche hanno fatto sì che non si verificasse il tracollo demografico conosciuto da numerose località dell'arco alpino occidentale e, di conseguenza, neppure fenomeni di "rinascita" come quelli attestati in alcuni comuni delle Alpi occidentali. Questa relativa stabilità, numericamente solo incrinata da una tendenza verso un progressivo ma lento declino demografico, nasconde interessanti fenomeni di ricambio dinamico della popolazione. Dall'indagine condotta è emerso come, a fronte di un determinato numero di abbandoni della montagna, si rilevano tuttavia altrettanto importanti fenomeni di neo-popolamento. Si osserva quindi un quadro complesso in cui si articolano diverse modalità dell'"abitare la montagna", non necessariamente aderenti alle tipologie analitiche che emergono dalla letteratura scientifica che si occupa con sempre maggior interesse dei fenomeni demografici in area alpina. Diviene pertanto necessario iniziare a ripensare le categorie concettuali a cui fare ricorso, in primo luogo il binomio "vecchio-nuovo abitante", in modo da disporre di categorie intermedie che siano maggiormente in grado di rendere conto della realtà emersa dall'indagine etnografica e delle differenti modalità, modulazioni ed intensità con cui è possibile "abitare la montagna".

Roberta Clara Zanini graduated in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Turin and is currently a PhD student in Human Sciences with specialization in Anthropological Sciences at the same university. Her main field of research is Alpine Anthropology, with particular interest to the most recent demographic dynamics of depopulation and repopulation and their influences in the phenomena of management and valorisation of local communities' historical memory. She also deals with the Anthropology of mining communities.